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ABSTRACT

"Dialogue" is a review of labor-management cooperation in public education, whose goal is to provide teachers, administrators, school boards, and labor relations practitioners with analyses of critical issues, information about current projects, reviews of relevant literature, and a variety of special features. Each issue is generally devoted to a single theme. This issue provides discussions of reduction in force (RIF) and teacher burnout. The first analysis begins by listing methods by which schools can best cope with RIF, but then focuses primarily on alternatives. These include early retirement, reduction of part-time help, job sharing, leaves of absence, giveback negotiations, and temporary layoffs. The subsequent discussion of teacher burnout provides a set of proposals for alleviating teacher stress. These include the following: (1) a program to help teachers generate special projects for sabbatical leaves; (2) self-help groups for teachers; and (3) stress management workshops. Footnotes are included for both essays. (TE)

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REDUCTION IN FORCE

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TEACHER BURNOUT

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REDUCTION IN FORCE

Though a teacher shortage is forecast for the 1990s, reduction in force (RIF) is still a major problem for U.S. school districts. Since the 1980-81 school year, more than 100,000 teachers have been laid off because of falling enrollment and revenue.[1] RIF particularly harries districts in the Midwest and Northeast, which lose students and tax dollars when families and industries move to the South. In two years, more than 3,800 teachers have lost their jobs in Michigan, where the auto industry suffered a long slump.[2] By 1992-93, the number of high school graduates is to fall 20% in Michigan and 16% in Indiana.[3] Across the nation, RIF remains "the most severe test" to confront public schools and their unions since the advent of collective bargaining, wrote Hugh B. Jascourt of the Public Employment Relations Research Institute.[4]

RIF imposes costs on the school budget and the human psyche. "Layoff is a dirty word," wrote William Scharffe, director of elementary and special education personnel for the Saginaw (Mich.) public schools. "It signifies personal and financial tragedy for its victims; it drains school budgets through unemployment costs; it demoralizes the entire school staff and casts a shadow over a community."[5]

Fortunately, schools are meeting the challenge. They're innovating ways to use teachers more effectively, to retain them for new jobs, or 'as a last resort' to help them depart from the district with dignity and financial security. Not only the teachers benefit: by avoiding bitter layoffs, standoffs, and strikes, the schools are more likely to make friends in the community and to win tax referendums.

* * * * *

The most obvious reason for RIF is the falling birth rate of recent years. From 1970 to 1982, the number of 5-

to 13-year olds dropped 17%; the number of 14- to 17-year olds fell 5.6%.[6] National K-12 enrollment fell to 44.2 million in 1983, 13.8% below 1970.[7] Fewer children going to school means fewer teachers are required.

In addition, many districts lose population as families move from the big cities to the suburbs, and from the Frost Belt to the Sun Belt. Sometimes the shifts may be startling: From 1980-81 to 1992-93, high school graduates are expected to rise by 49% in Texas and to fall by 31% in Maryland.[8]

Student numbers will not always dwindle. Already the birth rate is back on the rise, and the National Center for Educational Statistics predicts that the public schools will set enrollment records in the 1990s.[9] But schools of teacher education -- slow to obey the law of supply and demand -- are turning out fewer and fewer graduates. By 1988, the number of graduates will fall 20% short of the projected need for new teachers.[10]

For now, Midwestern districts worry more about teacher surpluses than shortages, and more about enrollment losses than gains. In Indiana, the pupil-to-teacher ratio for grades 1 through 6 fell from 23.2 in 1974-75 to 21.2 in 1981-82.[11] Perhaps the problem is not that there are too many teachers, but that there are too few dollars to pay for them. For example, in 1981-82, despite the growing complexity of education, Indiana provided no more money for its public schools than it did in 1974-75 -- $1.24 billion.[12] And the average salary of a Hoosier teacher, in grades 1 through 12, was $9,235, a drop of 1.5% since 1976-77.[13] (These figures are adjusted for inflation and expressed in 1972 dollars.)

Finances were not so troublesome for the schools 25 years ago, when voters -- rising to the Sputnik challenge -- regularly approved higher tax rates. But today's taxpayers

have revolted, forcing large tax cuts in California and Massachusetts and rejecting school-tax referendums throughout the country. In part, this may reflect the feeling that schools are wasting the money they already have, that they are failing to educate. Many voters seem to echo the sentiments of Paul Copperman, an education analyst: "Each generation of Americans has outstripped its parents in education, in literacy, and in economic attainment. For the first time in the history of our country, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents."[14]

Tight revenues make it more difficult for the schools to maintain their teaching staffs or their educational quality. And ironically, problems in these areas make many voters reluctant to approve more money for them. But the converse may also be true: By demonstrating imagination and efficiency in their solutions to RIF, the schools may begin to win back disillusioned voters, and to reach the level of revenues that will prevent RIF from recurring.

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So what can be done?

There are no magic cures to RIF, but here are some suggestions:

Develop a RIF plan in advance. Include the school board lawyer, and invite parents to take part. "They are the ones who could make or break community acceptance," one veteran administrator wrote.[15] Perhaps a labor-management committee, expanded to include input from parents, could work up the plan.

Don't put off the bad news. "Being candid with workers results in sustained productivity and the least

damage to morale," wrote Richard S. Deems, assistant professor of education at Iowa State University.[16]

Base your staffing plans on the enrollment projections for the middle of the school year -- not the beginning. High schools in particular lose students throughout the year, so a plan based on the initial enrollment could lead to over-staffing by year's end.[17]

Develop alternatives to RIF. When enrollment falls 30 to 50% over 10 years or more, and when nearly all staff members have tenure, then the district must look at creative alternatives.[18] There are plenty to consider.

Alternatives to RIF

Early retirement. If a district is top heavy with older teachers at the top of the pay scale, it may want to pay cash bonuses and full benefits to those agreeing to retire early. The district can still come out ahead. Scharffe calculated that if a teacher is earning $25,000 a year and retires at age 55 rather than age 70, then the district can save $639,000 -- $42,000 a year. (This assumes annual raises of 5% and savings in unemployment compensation, etc.) "Moreover, " Scharffe wrote, "layoffs are avoided and lives are not ruined."[19]

There are several paths to early retirement. One is to pay the difference between the retiree's salary and that of a junior teacher whose job has been saved. Another is to hire the retiree for a limited time as a curriculum developer, a master in-service teacher, etc. (One California district paid a retiree $5,000 for 30 days of consulting work.[20]) Yet another idea is to let the retiree substitute in the district without losing benefits.

The results are often dramatic. In just three years, 80 staff members retired early in Salt Lake City; and a cash

bonus program doubled the number of retiring teachers in Saginaw, Michigan.[21]

But a few caveats may be in order:

- To succeed, the program should pay at least a $10,000 bonus to a teacher retiring at age 55, Scharffe estimated.[22]
- The school board lawyer should check whether the early retirees qualify for state retirement benefits. In fact, the entire program should be reviewed in light of state laws.
- Administrators argue that the school board should adopt the program as a policy, rather than as part of the master contract. This way, the board can drop the plan if it fails to persuade enough teachers to retire.[23]
- Ironically, early retirement could drain the district of its best and most experience teachers.[24]

Reduce part-time help. Under their board policies and teacher contracts, many districts must lay off all part-time instructional personnel before terminating a full-time teacher. Taking this idea a step further, a district could consolidate part-time duties into full-time jobs for RIF-threatened teachers. In addition, they could get the first chance at openings for substitute teaching. Indeed, urban districts with high teacher absenteeism have long used extra staffers as permanent substitutes.[25] The same technique may also benefit smaller districts: Two or three could pool their efforts and share permanent substitutes, saving money and improving instruction.

Job sharing. Two or more teachers, each working a shorter schedule, can share a job. The concept is common in

industry -- but in public education, it is largely untested and controversial. Some union locals want to experiment with it; others fear that it will lead to fractional positions with no fringe benefits.[26]

Some early programs bear promise: by placing 38 teachers in job-sharing, the Kalamazoo, Michigan schools have avoided 19 layoffs.[27]

Job-sharing can benefit the teacher as well as the district. It can mean more time to prepare for class, and less fatigue at the end of the day, as well as more scope for affirmative action hiring. In addition, it can pair a novice teacher with a veteran, to their mutual benefit; the younger teacher profits from the other's experience, the older teacher profits from the other's enthusiasm.[28]

The district may divide up jobs in several ways:

- Daily morning or afternoon shifts can keep teachers fresh and in contact with students.
- Split-week schedules can give teachers larger blocks of free time and enable them to plan well in advance for class. In a common split week, each partner works 2 1/2 days to 3 days.
- Alternate week scheduling gives teachers long stretches of free time and classroom time. Typically, a teacher works Wednesday through Tuesday during alternate weeks.
- Alternate semester scheduling provides an even larger block of nonschool time.
- Uneven division of work requires one partner to assume more than 50% of the work -- teaching 3

or 4 days each week, or (particularly in high school) teaching most of the classes.

To succeed, a job-sharing plan might continue fringe benefits; guarantee that participants can return to full-time work when available; and require that all job-sharers attend staff meetings, parent conferences and open houses.[29]

Leaves of absence. The district may use leaves, paid or unpaid, as a "quick fix" to survive an immediate budget crunch -- or as a long-run solution that retrains teachers for shortage areas. Either method may spare the teacher the pangs of layoff, and save the district some money. In Lansing, Michigan, more than 40 teachers went on leave in one year, saving up to $513,000 in annual unemployment costs alone.[30]

The district may set up a cooperative program with a nearby university to retrain teachers on leave for special education, math, science, bilingual education or other areas with chronic shortages.[31] For teachers on unpaid leave, the district might pay tuition.

The district might also continue fringe benefits -- especially health insurance -- to employees on leave. And it might guarantee that they may return to full-time work later, if available.[32]

Giveback negotiations. Historically, public education unions have rarely agreed to givebacks. But if the school board wants to keep as many teachers as possible, then it may look at raises, sick leave buy-backs, and severance pay. Or it may try to negotiate for greater productivity, which may affect class size, classroom aides, and substitute teachers.[33]

Sometimes the school board can simply cut the teachers' salary or reassign them to positions with lower

pay. A teacher who protests typically carries the "very heavy burden of proving that the school board acted arbitrarily or upon improper considerations."[34] But though the school board may save money, it may also pay a price in teacher morale.

Layoffs. Sometimes the last resort is the only practical one, and the school board is forced to terminate teachers. In this case, it might try to work with the teachers unit -- perhaps through a labor-management committee -- to devise a way to terminate teachers for cause. In Salt Lake City, the district and the teachers association agreed on a procedure that gave teachers time to correct their weaknesses, thus protecting teachers' "due process" (constitutional right to a full and fair hearing). The district could terminate teachers -- or administrators and classified employees -- who failed to remediate. In three years, Salt Lake City put 31 teachers on remediation, eventually keeping 14 and releasing 17.[35]

If notices are inevitable, then the district should try to issue them when they will cause the least turmoil. "One school board thought it was doing teachers a favor by sending out pink slips in January for the following fall's school year," Deems wrote, "The board thought this would give employees lots of time to find other employment. Instead, morale dropped, attendance problems increased, and the effectiveness of the school system slid."[36]

Districts should try to help teachers find new jobs. "Most laid-off workers need some help to restore their sense of self-esteem," Deems wrote. "Some might lose the will to look for other jobs."[37] The district might form an employment pool with a nearby, growing district, referring laid-off teachers to it for job interviews. The district may go even further afield to help place its teachers. In 1981, administrators in Fairfield, Connecticut invited the personnel director of the Houston schools, who had 200

teaching jobs to fill, to come to Fairfield and interview more than 100 applicants from the region. He eventually hired five or six.[38]

Reductions in force are common in manufacturing and private services as well as in education. But U.S. schools have an unusual opportunity: While the auto and steel industries periodically cut wages or lay off thousands, the schools can demonstrate more gentle and ingenious solutions, such as offering incentives for early retirement, retraining teachers and sharing jobs.

In doing so, schools can regain the trust of their community's citizens who -- whatever their doubts about the local schools -- have never lost their faith in education. "People are steadfast in their belief that education is the major foundation for the future strength of this country," said the National Commission for Excellence in Education. "They even consider education more important than developing the best industrial system or the strongest military force, perhaps because they understand education as the cornerstone of both."[39]

A 1982 Gallup poll showed that Americans regarded education as the top priority for public funding.[40] By applying compassionate, new solutions to their immediate problems of falling enrollment, the schools may regain the public trust and funds that will help them to flourish in the future.

FOOTNOTES

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TEACHER BURNOUT

"Burnout" -- job-related stress that hinders teachers in working effectively or in enjoying life -- is "a major new malady (that) threatens to reach epidemic proportions if it isn't checked soon," said Willard McGuire, former president of the National Education Association.[1] A 1976 survey of U.S. teachers identified stress as their leading health problem; indeed, burnout appears to be driving thousands out of their profession. In an NEA poll taken in the late 1970s, one-third of the teachers surveyed said that if they could start over, they would enter another profession. Only 60% planned to teach until retirement.[2]

Burnout isn't unique to teachers. The U.S. Clearinghouse for Mental Health Information estimates that stress-related problems reduce the productive capacity of workers by $17 billion a year.[3] But psychometric studies indicate that teachers suffer more intensely from burnout than do other workers, except for air traffic controllers and physicians.[4]

The schoolhouse often seems like a pressure cooker to teachers. Unlike other professionals, they are isolated from adults for most of the workday. Alone, they must wrestle with a host of frustrations -- the impossibility of working in-depth with as many as 150 students; the bitter complaints of parents; the insults and vandalism of students; the occasional physical assault. "I feel like a rubber band that's ready to snap," said one teacher, "and there is nothing I can do to relieve the tension."[5]

That frustration is typical. "Burnout is particularly stubborn to treat because it is so individual in its character and intensity," wrote Paula Jorde, director of Early Childhood Teacher Training at Mills College in California. "Most people caught in the burnout trap lose perspective of their situation and try to treat the symptoms -- the back

pain, the headache, the insomnia -- while ignoring the underlying causes."[6]

To some extent, schools or school districts can help teachers recover from burnout by identifying the causes and facilitating the cures. One useful vehicle is the labor-management committee (LMC), which includes teachers, school board members and administrators and which balances labor and management interests. LMCs are effective forums in which non-contract issues of mutual concern, such as burnout, can be addressed.

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As NEA's Albert Alshuler wrote, "Stress occurs when individuals believe the demands from the environment are more than they can handle."[7] The solution is to reduce the demands -- or to convince people that they can handle them. Reduction of demands is the more permanent remedy, but it is also the more difficult: No school system can immediately cut class size, straighten out disruptive students, and hire more teacher aides. (Even if it could, it still might not reach the real sources of stress.) But the school system can quickly lighten the load on teachers by showing them how to cope with stress -- or how to escape stress for a while. Toward these ends, an LMC could:

Set up a program to help teachers get away from it all. The traditional cure for burnout is a sabbatical, enabling teachers to escape their daily hassles, to explore their horizons, and to return to work renewed. Mena Topjian, a first-grade teacher in Lexington, Massachusetts, traveled from Alaska to Argentina, studying North American groups. A third-grade teacher in Brattleboro, Vermont, studied minimum competency standards in her state.[8]

Schools can provide the teacher with money as well as freedom. In the Palo Alto, California, system, Project Renew distributed grants to employees for special projects. One 1977 grant released a teacher from her class to write a unit on the King Tutankhamen exhibit coming to the area.[9]

An LMC could either administer such a project or help talented teachers to find their own grants. If the school system has a declining enrollment, then the LMC could address two problems simultaneously by including a sabbatical program in its reduction-in-force plan.

Form self-help groups. An extensive sabbatical program is "not viable in a large, underfinanced school system," wrote William Walley, of the Chicago Teacher Union, and Joseph P. Stokes, of the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle.[10] For the Chicago system, they helped to develop a more inexpensive approach toward burnout: Small groups of distressed teachers that resolve each member's problems.

Each group meets 90 minutes a week -- often at a site away from the school, so that attending teachers won't worry about what administrators may think. Typically, each member outlines his or her problem, and then the group decides which problem to discuss and resolve at that meeting. The member with the problem describes it in detail and tells how he or she copes. Next, the group brainstorms, with the member writing down its suggestions without comment. He or she will try one of these approaches in the coming week and will keep in touch with a fellow member.[11]

Each group has about a half-dozen members, led by a volunteer with 36 hours of training in communication, group dynamics, ways to cope with stress, etc.

Some school systems have taken a similar, but more

formal approach. The Palo Alto system maintained a Personal Help Center, where teachers could unburden themselves to counselors.[12] In New Orleans, the Orleans Parish School System provided eight teacher advocates who new teachers could call for help with curriculum and discipline. Both programs were confidential.

Help teachers to handle stress while on the job. The LMC can also organize stress management workshops, showing teachers how to organize their time, how to define and achieve their goals, and how to simply kick off their shoes and relax.

Any workshop could profitably use Jorde's paperback, Avoiding Burnout, chockful of worksheets and lively words to the wise. For instance, Jorde invokes Parkinson's Law -- "Any task will expand to the amount of time allocated to it" -- to explain why teachers often feel that they are spinning their wheels and burning out. She suggests that they keep a time log, in 20-minute increments, to figure out how to do their work more quickly and efficiently -- freeing up precious minutes for themselves.[13]

Probably they should use those minutes to relax. Herbert Benson of Harvard University suggests this relaxation technique, adapted from Transcendental Meditation: Sit in a quiet spot; close your eyes; relax all your muscles, beginning with your feet and gradually working up to your head; and silently repeat, "One" (which has been dubbed the Harvard mantra). Each session lasts 10 to 12 minutes.[14]

The people who find it most difficult to relax -- and who are most vulnerable to burnout -- are those who live for their work, "whose only source of recognition and gratification is their career," Jorde wrote.[15] The LMC might enrich their lives by organizing extracurricular activities that relieve stress -- jogging, for instance.

Beverly Bimes, who recovered so fully from burnout that she was named National Teacher of the Year, partly credited a teachers' running program designed by the track coach at her school. "Seeing 15 to 20 teachers whose only concept of exercise was walking to the school cafeteria, attempting to run with the boy's track team, was a sight to behold," she reported. "However, the fringe benefits were unbelievable." On route to weekend runs, the teachers "found themselves talking about school enthusiastically, for they had discovered themselves, each other and their professional pride."[16]

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Exercise is one of the five most effective ways to reduce burnout, concluded a three-year longitudinal study of management stress. The four other methods: regular sleep and good health habits; separating work from leisure; talking to peers; and occasionally escaping the pressures of the job.[17]

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Whether they are as simple as a country run or as extensive as a sabbatical, the purpose of these burnout strategies is to enable the teacher to take things in stride. "When the shoelace breaks, the psychological stress is from the implication that you cannot control your own life, that you're helpless in the face of the most stupid trivialities -- or, worse, that such things happen because of your own inadequacies in the first place," said psychologist Richard Lazarus.[18]

Teachers must master their own lives before they can hope to shape those of their students. "It was Alexander the Great who said he was indebted to his father for living, but to his teacher for living well," wrote Marge Scherer, senior editor of Instructor. "In the long run, living well -- and teaching how to do it -- is the best revenge."[19]

FOOTNOTES

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